Personal Isn't the Point

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Body

In the aftermath of the recent State of the Union address, I was left wondering one thing: Does our president live in the same world as everyone else in the United States? Too often, those criticizing Bush are labeled as unpatriotic, and their arguments against him are dismissed as purely personal attacks. I can't speak for anyone else, but I have no argument with George W. Bush the man; I have trouble with George W. Bush the president.

While I have followed the day-to-day occurrences in the Middle East since middle school, I never grasped why democracy hasn't taken root there. Like President Bush has said, Islamic tradition and Arab culture are not incompatible with democracy and individual freedom. What Bush and his supporters seem to ignore, though, is the true source of the problem.

To simplify a rather complicated argument, oil is evil. Rather, a nation in which less than 5 percent of population is needed to harvest and distribute the vast majority of the GDP does not lend itself to a representative form of government. To look at U.S. history as a parallel, what was the original problem that caused unrest in the colonies? Taxation without representation -- as we have all learned in high school. Imagine, however, if Britain were sitting on a vast source of virtually free wealth, such as diamonds or oil. There would be no taxation, no negotiation between the citizen and the state for funds. How can we expect rentier states, in which the government does not depend upon taxation for funding but rather upon a single natural resource, to become representative? No amount of smart bombs and wars can fix that problem. But reducing our reliance on petroleum just might. Don't tell Halliburton executives that!

The "No Child Left Behind" initiative is similarly misguided. For those who are not sure of how the initiative works, students are required to take tests measuring basic skills, such as literacy and arithmetic. Those school districts with the greatest improvement and best scores from year to year receive the largest increases in federal funding. While it has a good intention, the plan is woefully inadequate and unbalanced. Let's take my school district in Westchester, N.Y. My mother teaches sixth-grade math and reading at John Jay Middle School, and most of her classes consist of mixed ability groups, including special-education children. Our school district accepts special-ed students from districts around the county -- even from districts far more affluent from our own, such as Scarsdale or Chappaqua. Under the "No Child Left Behind" initiative, the test scores for the special-ed students are included in our district's score, and thereby drag down the district's overall score. Other districts, by moving their children into our schools, do not have to include the special-ed students, raising their district's overall scores. Who receives the largest increase in funding? The other districts, of course. Meanwhile, my mother shares a classroom with two other teachers and doesn't have her own desk.

Lastly, it seems that some people believe that the military supports the war in Iraq, and that President Bush respects the men and women of the military more than his Democratic foes. Yet, his Democratic opponents have far better military credentials than Bush does. John Kerry is a decorated Vietnam War hero. Wesley Clark was a

four-star general and directed action that prevented a potential genocide with minimal bloodshed. Bush served his term during Vietnam in the Texas Air National Guard, knowing that he would never see combat as a member of the reserves. The current military occupation of Iraq, however, has required that today's reservists, most of whom never signed on desiring active combat duty, be mobilized and see combat in one of the deadliest areas in the war. Furthermore, most of those reservists are serving far longer terms abroad than expected, taking them away from their families, friends and futures.

Before the Iraq war, President Bush cited the clear and present danger of weapons of mass destruction as the primary purpose for invading Iraq. While the accuracy of the intelligence used to support such claims was questioned at the time, the Bush administration steadfastly stuck to its story of WMDs posing a threat to the rest of the region. Yet, more than 85 percent of the search for WMDs has taken place, and none have been found. It would seem to me that if Bush had any true respect for our soldiers, he would tell them the truth or at least admit that his administration made a mistake. And while our death toll rises, Bush has not made it to a single funeral for a soldier who has died in this administration's war.

Those of us who criticize Bush do sometimes use personal attacks to vent frustrations. Our true quarrel, however, is not with Bush personally; rather, it is with his policies. Dismissing attacks against this president as merely personal vitriol misses the point and dodges the real reasons why so many Americans, Democrats and Republicans alike, want to see him and all of his supporters out of power.

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